

Types of discourses about Anthroposophy in relation to Waldorf education (Part 2)

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ABSTRACT. This paper (in two parts) outlines various types of discourses of Anthroposophy from the perspective of scholars of Waldorf education, offering a commentary on each one. The aim of the paper is to help provide a framework for scholars, students of Waldorf education, teachers and anyone who wishes to make informed judgements about the possible relationships between Waldorf education and anthroposophy. It makes a basic distinction between an individual's relationship to anthroposophy, which can be based on belief, conviction, or experience and which they are totally free to have, and the position of an institution like a school or university to the theory underpinning Waldorf education. The main problem that Waldorf education has in being taken seriously by the academy and the public is the association with esoteric and apparently unscientific aspects of Anthroposophy. Gaining acceptance for Anthroposophy as a legitimate science of the spirit is worth striving for but Waldorf education cannot wait that long. The discourses described include the charismatic nature of the anthroposophical movement, whether it is a religion or ideology, whether everything published in Steiner's name is Anthroposophy, Anthroposophy as a 'theory of everything' or grand narrative, Anthroposophy as an esoteric schooling and path of meditation and finally as a science of the spiritual. In the final section the paper addresses the possible role of Anthroposophy in teacher education and as a basis for Waldorf education. I argue that Steiner should be referenced like any other author, and anthroposophy should be referenced as a cultural phenomenon and studied using the appropriate hermeneutic methods. Ultimately if anthroposophy is seen as a spiritual activity of thinking and not as a body of knowledge, the relationship between Waldorf education and anthroposophy is not one of formal allegiance but of individual activity.

ABSTRAKT. In diesem Artikel (in zwei Teilen) werden verschiedene Arten von Diskursen der Anthroposophie aus der Perspektive der Waldorfpädagogik skizziert und kommentiert. Ziel des Artikels ist es, Wissenschaftler*innen, Studierende der Waldorfpädagogik, Lehrkräften und allen, die sich ein fundiertes Urteil über die möglichen Beziehungen zwischen Waldorfpädagogik und Anthroposophie bilden möchten, einen Rahmen zu bieten. Es wird grundlegend unterschieden zwischen der Beziehung eines Individuums zur Anthroposophie, die auf Glauben, Überzeugung oder Erfahrung basieren kann und die jeder für sich frei wählen kann, und der Position einer Institution wie einer Schule oder Universität zur Theorie, die der Waldorfpädagogik zugrunde liegt. Das Hauptproblem, das die Waldorfpädagogik hat, um von der Akademie und der Öffentlichkeit ernst genommen zu werden, ist die Verbindung mit esoterischen und scheinbar unwissenschaftlichen Aspekten der Anthroposophie. Die Anerkennung der Anthroposophie als legitime Geisteswissenschaft ist erstrebenswert, aber die Waldorfpädagogik kann nicht so lange warten. Die beschriebenen Diskurse umfassen die charismatische Natur der anthroposophischen Bewegung, ob es sich um eine Religion oder Ideologie handelt, ob alles, was in Steiners Namen veröffentlicht wird, Anthroposophie ist, Anthroposophie als „Theorie von allem“ oder große Narrative, Anthroposophie als esoterische Schulung und Meditationsweg und schließlich als Wissenschaft des Spirituellen. Im letzten Abschnitt befasst sich der Artikel mit der möglichen Rolle der Anthroposophie in

der Lehrkräftebildung und als Grundlage für die Waldorfpädagogik. Ich vertrete die Auffassung, dass Steiner wie jeder andere Autor referenziert und die Anthroposophie als kulturelles Phänomen betrachtet und mit den entsprechenden hermeneutischen Methoden untersucht werden sollte. Wenn Anthroposophie als eine geistige Aktivität des Denkens und nicht als ein Korpus von Erkenntnissen verstanden wird, ist die Beziehung zwischen Waldorfpädagogik und Anthroposophie letztlich nicht eine der formalen Zugehörigkeit, sondern eine der individuellen Aktivität.

In the first part of this paper the aim of the paper and the question of positionality were disused as well as the following discourses, anthroposophy as charismatic movement, world view (Weltanschauung), as being identical with Steiner's complete works, as grand narrative, a modern esoteric spiritual path through the School of Michael, a set of pathways of spiritual schooling, meditation and contemplative practices.

7. Anthroposophy as a (the) science of the spirit

Steiner always wanted his approach to be understood as scientific and A.P. Shephard (1961) aptly titled his biography of Steiner, *Scientist of the Invisible*. Steiner used the term *Geisteswissenschaft* (literally spiritual science) synonymously with anthroposophy. He presented his experiences of the spiritual world as being based on a scientific approach. Scientific method, however, as we use the term today, is based on the premise that explanatory theory is generated to account for phenomena, data is gathered and interpreted, and conclusions are formed that are plausible and where possible reproducible. Across the sciences, methods vary but all are governed by the principles of credibility, trustworthiness, transparency and validity. "A central criterion of today's scientific (not merely natural scientific) methods is the demand for intersubjective verifiability of research results" (Rittelmeyer, 2023, p. 67). In Steiner's day scientific method was somewhat narrower and was dominated by the positivist-empirical approaches of the natural sciences. The basic dilemma we face here is that although Steiner frequently said that anyone with an open mind and who follows the steps he took, will be able to verify the results of his spiritual research, to date very few people, if any, have plausibly claimed to have done so. Thus, Steiner's appears to be a one-man science, which is a tautology.

Steiner's theory of knowledge is an attempt to create an epistemological basis for the generation of knowledge about the world, which is first and foremost a scientific gesture. His aim was to show that there are no theoretical limits to knowledge, as Kant and other important philosophers had suggested. Steiner frequently cites the German physiologist, Emil du Bois-Reymond's statement that we can only push the boundaries of knowledge as far as we can make observations, beyond which *ignorabimus* (we will never know), though to be fair to du Bois-Reymond, he was referring to the nature of sensations and sentience in living beings (Finkelstein, 2013). The question of sentience has to this day not been entirely resolved. Du Bois-Reymond, who was also a polymath, charismatic speaker and one of the pioneers of the modern neurosciences, was in a way the antithesis of Steiner, because he sought a scientific account of the human psyche using experimental science, rather than spiritual imagination.

Comment

From the perspective of Waldorf education, there are three questions that concern us here, and none of them can be discussed in any detail (my aim here is merely to highlight what they are).

- How credible is anthroposophy as a science of the spirit?
- How can scholars deal with Steiner's texts in a scientific way?
- How can anthroposophical methods be used as part of educational research?

A Science of the spirit

In the West, since the Renaissance there has been a separation of religion, philosophy, art and science, though they all have common roots in human inquiry, and as Cassirer (1962) has shown, people use multiple and equally valid methods to express their understanding of the world include myth, religion, narrative, art, philosophy and science. The question is, what did Steiner actually mean by a scientific approach?

Part of the problem is that in German, the word *Geist* can have both a spiritual and a non-spiritual meaning, it can mean spirit or it can mean the mind and mental or cognitive activity in general, for example, the German translation of the neurologist Eric Kandel's 2007 book *In Search of Memory: The emergence of a new science of mind*, the subtitle was translated as: *Die Entstehung einer neuen Wissenschaft des Geistes* -literally the emergence of a new science of the spirit. In anthroposophy the translation of Geist into English is always ambivalent and in German this ambivalence works to the benefit of anthroposophy today.

Epistemology was a highly political and cultural topic in late 19th Century Germany (Finkelstein, 2013). Many leading thinkers, such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), were trying to establish the credibility of a social, cultural and human science, distinct from the science of nature (Naturwissenschaft), which was built on identifying and applying natural laws. The term *Geisteswissenschaft* (literally spiritual science) referring to the humanities, acquired this meaning mainly through the work of Dilthey. He distinguished the natural sciences from the humanities by their different functions. Natural science attempts to *explain* natural phenomena objectively and searches for causal explanations that are valid independently of human subjectivity. Dilthey (1883/1927) sought an alternative method to the positivist, empirical causality of natural phenomena in what he called a philosophy of life based on an intensification of the consciousness of experience. He argued that human life, its products and our history have their own self-created (rather naturally created) meaning and this requires the method of hermeneutics to understand them through interpretation. He also believed that the autonomy of the human mind cannot be determined by fixed natural laws but that it belongs to cultural and historical processes of change. Thus, people are not only determined by natural laws and forces but also have the potential to shape themselves through the process known as *Bildung*, by engaging with and recognizing the culture in which they are embedded.

The humanities have the task of *understanding* the human mind and human culture, as these are only produced by people themselves and cannot be fully explained by natural causes. This is why the humanities are central to the process of *Bildung*, which is a central and multi-valent concept in German culture, that the word education does not wholly encompass. What runs as a common thread through all versions of *Bildung* is the idea that the self-formation and maturation of the person as a life-long process in the direction of individual emancipation and the wellbeing of civil society via culture (Horlacher, 2017). The idea of *Bildung*, if not the word itself, has a much wider sphere of influence than the German speaking world, having travelled to America in the 19th Century (often referred to as continental philosophy, or humanist *Bildung*) through influential figures such as Emerson, Thoreau and Dewey and still influences many thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum (2011), whose theory of capabilities is a contemporary version of *Bildung*. More recently it has become very influential in China, which sees *Bildung* as aligned with Neo-Confucian notions of the harmonious development of the person in and through the family/community (Deng, 2013).

Later in his career, Dilthey changed his hermeneutic approach to the humanities, to the acknowledging a connection between experience, expression and understanding, which added a linguistic layer to understanding and also adds an element of reflexivity to the knowledge process. Dilthey's approach strongly influenced Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg Gadamer, Ernst Cassirer, Martin Buber, Theodor Adorno, Paul Ricoeur and many others.

In Dilthey's account of *Geisteswissenschaft* (2017/1883), spirit is identical to the Romantic concept of life and is based on experience, which is the basis for understanding the meaning of events. We understand because our individual mind is able to retrieve and recognize a higher meaning that is located in the spirit. Therefore, a hermeneutic approach to understanding human thought, history and creativity is appropriate. Understanding is therefore the rediscovery of the self in the other, because the self and the other have a common source in the spirit and spirit recognizes spirit. We understand the objects of the world because they

too are an expression of the spirit: We can understand whatever is a manifestation of the mind; whatever we can understand is a manifestation of the mind. Much of this account resonates with Steiner's.

As far as I know, only a few authors have tried to connect Steiner with Dilthey (one exception is Jörg Ewertowski, 2010). For me as a non-philosopher, there seem to be many fruitful overlaps. The most important difference between Dilthey and Steiner is that the latter saw anthroposophy as *the* spiritual science (singular) in relation to both the natural sciences and the cultural sciences. This distinction has been inadequately understood and this leaves a considerable ambivalence in the relationship between Waldorf education and Anthroposophy.

In Steiner's *A Science of Knowing: Outlines of an Epistemology implicit in the Goethean World View* (1988, originally published in 1886), he recommends grasping the interaction of causality in the inorganic world (much as Dilthey describes *Naturwissenschaft*), but,

Ultimately it is true for all science what Goethe expressed so aptly with the words 'In and for itself theory is worth nothing, except insofar as it makes us believe in the interconnections of phenomena'. Through science we are always bringing separate facts of our experience into connection with each other. In the inorganic nature we see causes and effects as separate from each other, and we seek their connections in the appropriate sciences. In the organic world, we perceive species and genera in the organic world and seek to establish their mutual relationships. In history, individual cultural epochs of humanity contrast with one another; we endeavour to recognize the inner dependence of one stage of development on another. "(Section III The task of science- here 'theory' is closer to the meaning of the Greek *theoria*, 'what thinking sees')."

One could say that here Steiner offers a synthesis of Dilthey's juxtaposition of natural and cultural sciences in his reinterpretation of experience in connection with the question of the relationship between idea and reality. His answer is that thinking is a higher experience in the experience and at the same time an interpreter that interprets the gestures of experience. In Steiner's theory of knowledge, the person's soul is a subjective arena of the encounter with the world mediated by the senses, and the thinking Self that makes sense of the resulting experiences, which is ultimately a phenomenological process. The title of Jap Sijmon's (2008) analysis of Steiner's method is apt: *Phenomenology and Idealism*. Dahlin, emphasizes that Steiner's theory of knowledge is non-representational, that is, the mind does not have to stop at the process of producing mental images to represent what has been perceived, but in a second step, experiences them as reality, or rather, in bringing experience and concept together, the subject produces reality.

In his book *Riddles of Philosophy*, Steiner considers the difference between the natural sciences and the humanities as follows:

Observations on the spiritual world in the manner of Dilthey or Eucken find the sum of humanity's cultural experiences as the spiritual world. With this world as the only comprehensible spiritual world, one does not stand on the ground that corresponds to the scientific way of thinking. The totality of world beings is organized for the natural scientific view in such a way that the physical human being in their individual existence appears like a summary, a unity, to which all other natural processes and natural beings point. The world of culture is that which is created by this human being. However, it is not an individual unity of a higher kind in relation to the individuality of the human being. The spiritual science referred to here, points to an experience that the soul can have independently of the body. And this experience reveals itself as an individual. It appears like a higher human being. (2010, S. 515, MR trans)

Steiner's starting horizon for his spiritual science was that the most important philosophical knowledge cannot be articulated in words; words can only indicate the presence of a concept. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose thinking was close to Steiner's in many ways, referred to this as 'transcendental empiricism' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). Dahlin (2013) has noted that Steiner's theory of knowledge is also non-representational, intuitive and therefore immanent. It is active knowledge-in-the-moment and in-the-situation and is thus more suited to events and processes than fixed, permanent concepts. Steiner's knowledge of the physical world is based on polarities and transitions between states, in the organic world on types that describe processes and relationships rather than fixed categories. Our connection to the world through the senses is phenomenological, whilst our link to the spiritual world through thinking is a form of idealism, the concepts we intuit in thinking are deemed to be both universal and eternal. In the human

world the central narrative is changing consciousness. One may disagree with the examples Steiner gave and the structures he put them in (e.g. cultural epochs or historical periods as symptoms of a teleology) but his relational account of knowledge is very contemporary (see also Welburn, 2004, Amrine, 2019). Above all, his own method of cognition argues against using his categories and concepts as fixed truths. Steiner's knowledge is productive and emergent, meaning it has to be produced anew each time, rather than reproduced as fact (see da Veiga, 2016).

Steiner's claim that anthroposophy is a science of the spirit is one of the main stumbling blocks to any scientific recognition of anthroposophy. In many ways accepting anthroposophy as a 'Weltanschauung' or an esoteric system or even as a philosophy would be less problematic. Nobody would try to argue that Buddhism, Catholicism, the Kabbalah or indeed Theosophy are sciences but that that does not lessen their relevance and value as cultural phenomena. Rather, as Ernst Cassirer (1962) has argued, language, art, myth, religion, maths, geometry and science – and one can add esoteric systems – are all forms of symbolic imagination and intelligence that give people access to 'higher knowledge', in the sense that these symbolic systems can be used to express multiple if not unlimited relations between things and ideas. They are all different but equally valid fields of human inquiry and knowing. Perhaps, in his zeal to overcome materialism in a scientific age, his leap to claiming that anthroposophy is a science, was a step too far (unless you believe in his infallibility).

Later in his career, Steiner modified his notion of a spiritual science in relation to 'mainstream' science. In his book *Riddles of the Soul* (Steiner, 1917/2010 in German and 2010 in English) and the lecture "Anthroposophy has something to add to modern sciences" from 12.11.1917 (Steiner, 2005), he offers glimpses of a new approach, but emphasizes that as long as science refuses to acknowledge the spirit (as he understands it), and treats the human mind as a closed system and culture as the product of this system, it will not really understand the human being in the way anthroposophy does.

Steiner's criticisms of the science of his day are barely relevant given how much the sciences have changed over the past century, and anyway are not in themselves arguments for taking anthroposophy as a science seriously. In educational science it is quite possible today to base statements on hermeneutic interpretation. As Tyson (2025) there is a growing body of published empirical science related to Waldorf education and there could be much more, given better resources and more recognition that this is important.

Engaging with Steiner's texts in a scientific way

From an intercultural and global perspective, the discussion of whether the spirit is real or not is clearly a Western perspective. In Asia and Africa and many other parts of the world, not to mention indigenous people everywhere, the existence of a spiritual dimension is not in doubt. The fact is, at least in the English language scientific world, making reference to the spiritual dimension of life is by no means ruled out. There are even renowned peer-reviewed journals, in the field of education, psychology, philosophy and comparative religion in which topics of spirituality are regularly discussed. Examples include the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* or the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* (transpersonal means non-bodily consciousness), both of which have published articles on Steiner and Waldorf. Today they speak of 'spiritual but not religious' and assume that there is a spiritual dimension to life that cannot be traced back to physical causes. Spirituality today is often defined as the experience of being part of a larger, non-material and meaningful whole that is not just the result of neuronal activity (Schreiber, 2012, Huss, 2014, Miller, 2015). The work of Lisa Miller (2015) from Columbia University New York builds a bridge to pedagogy. As we have seen above, talking about spirituality rather than religiosity, which has too many associations with specific religions, can open doors to understanding, that have often been closed.

The scientific approach to pedagogy and anthroposophical sources is an essential aspect of teacher education, because, as Desjepper & Schmelzer (2024) emphasize,

In this context, the development of a scientific attitude is central. Those who study anthroposophy should learn to perceive carefully, think clearly and arrive at appropriate judgements. Anthroposophy is not something pre-scientific but, as Rudolf Steiner's writings „Fundamentals of a Theory of Knowledge of Goethe's World View“ and his „Philosophy of Freedom“ show, is clearly and unambiguously based on the Enlightenment (2024, p.29).

Rather than treating Steiner texts as facts we can engage within them hermeneutically (see Rawson, 2021a, 2024, Rawson and Bransby, 2025). This means applying various steps of interpretation, by using for example, an empathic form of understanding (what does the text say in my own words?), followed by a dialogic form of understanding (contextualizing and interrogating the text) and then moving towards a transactional mode of understanding (in what way has working with this text changed me?). Secondly, as Rittlemeyer (1990, 2023) has suggested, Steiner's ideas should be treated as heuristic models to direct the researcher's attention towards certain phenomena.

Using anthroposophical research methods

As Schieren (2008, 2011) has discussed, anthroposophical research is best suited to understanding people, including self-observation. Göschel (2012) has shown how this can be done in his account of individual case studies in therapeutic education using a method he calls biographical mythos. This is an important step in establishing anthroposophical research methods. Göschel's (2012) study locates Steiner's spiritual science in Ken Wilber's (2001) third category of sciences. Alongside the empirical natural sciences and the hermeneutic human sciences, Wilber identifies a third category of sciences, the contemplative sciences. It is based on spiritual experiences that are gained through contemplative practices and that can be regarded as trans-subjective (i.e. beyond objective and subjective) results of intentional processes of consciousness that depend on the development and expansion of the researcher's awareness. Their focus extends to all areas of the physical, organic and psychological levels. Its scientific validity depends on contemplative-intersubjective plausibility, and its function is to direct the subject's attention and vision through an inductive, guiding use of language, which basically means, „If you want to know this, you have to do that“ (Wilbur, 2001, p.81, cited in Göschel, 2012). Contemplative science is always struggling to find a language to express the often-inexpressible experiences and has to make do with multiple descriptions that emphasize different aspects of an experience. As Göschel explains,

According to Steiner's anthroposophical method, the transition from the formal sciences, whose object is pure ideas, to contemplative spiritual science results from turning the thinking attention away from concepts, as the content of thinking, and towards the active thinking activity itself. The resulting direct experience of a completely transparent, living mental process at its point of origin leads to a change in the experienced quality of the thinking activity. The thinking consciousness learns more and more to familiarize itself with the dynamic-generative laws of nature that are effective as living forces of creation and order in the world and in the human being. These lose their abstract quality and are transformed in the experience of the cognizing subject into living views of being with inherent effectiveness and ontological status (2012, p. 119-20. MR trans)

Here we have the essence of anthroposophy as a method, as opposed to anthroposophy as a collection of fixed concepts. Concepts lose their static and abstract qualities and are transformed in the experience of the cognizing subject into a „living view of being with inherent efficacy and ontological status“ when the subject engages in an active path of schooling thinking through meditation and contemplation. This leads via the various stages that Steiner describes as imagination, inspiration and intuition. This is why Jan Göschel's (2012) scientific account and of the children's conference, or individual case study in the therapeutic field as a biographical myth and as a socio-artistic dialogue process is of great importance. We perceive people in their appearance and actions in space and time and try to experience the effect they have on us and then mutually, dialogically and in value-free ways, try to put this into words, so that something of the essence of the person can be experienced through intuition. Otto Scharmer (2016, see also Scharmer and Kaufer, 2025) describes a similar process in his Theory U, in which an attempt is made to recognize the emerging future as it arises. In this way, Steiner's theory of cognition can be transferred to the context of practice.

Anthroposophy as capacity building

Steiner often pointed out that becoming a Waldorf teacher requires active knowing, as well as what he calls passive knowing, what today we would call propositional knowledge. We could call Steiner's idea of

active knowing, knowing-in-practice (Kelly, 2006), which is the ability to observe and understand complex pedagogical situations and be able to intuitively respond in a meaningful way. Again, this is an application of Steiner's productive theory of knowing. This idea is closely related to a number of important ideas about knowledge that we can associate with John Dewey's (1938) notion of the continuum of experience in education, but also with Max van Manen (1991) notion of pedagogical tact or knowing-in-context and also John Elliott's (2009, Elliott and Lukes, 2008) 'case-based reasoning', and Gert Biesta's virtuosity (2015, 2020). All these authors in one way or another draw on Aristotle's notion of phronesis, or practical wisdom, which is about situated knowing rather than general, theoretical or idealist/essential knowledge. This involves in Elliott's words, "discerning the particularities of a situation from the standpoint of an ethical agent, and in the process, discriminating its practically relevant features" (Elliott, 2009, p. 29). The important aspect of this pedagogical intuition is that it involves action, rather than mere contemplation or understanding- in fact the full understanding may only occur in retrospective reflection.

Steiner's version of this explicitly takes the spiritual dimension into account. In Steiner's terms, this knowing cannot be based on passive, or acquired pre-existent knowledge or knowledge based only on what can be observed, but rather the mind needs to become sensitive to what is emergent within the whole human being, spiritually and psychologically by a process of empathy, in which the educator is able to experience the child or young person as an emergent Self. Ita Wegman, with whom Steiner developed anthroposophical medical and therapeutic practices, developed a similar 'case-based reasoning' through empathic identification, which allows an intuitive experience of the processes within the other person and out of this insight into what is needed at that moment, through 'the courage to heal' (Selg, 2017). Related to education, Steiner called this the right educator-disposition ("eine rechte Erziehungsgesinnung"), which is to be experienced in one's own will as a knowing activity. As Steiner puts it, „One does not get to know the human being through passive knowledge. What one knows about the human being must be experienced, at least to a certain degree, as feeling the creative aspect of one's own being: one must fulfil it in one's own volition as a knowing activity“ (Steiner, 2014, pp. 288-9, GA 36, lecture from 1.4.1923).

The relationship between Anthroposophy and Waldorf education that arises from such practices is not based on belief or imitation, but on an embodied understanding that is evaluated in practice through critical reflection, since intuitive actions are not always correct. The question is how this disposition can be learned. Steiner's suggestion, referred to as meditatively acquired knowledge, was to study anthroposophical anthropology, meditate or contemplate it and then be able to 'recall' it in a pedagogical situation as intuition.

Working with boundary ideas

In his (1978) book on Waldorf teacher education, Kiersch points out the connection between Steiner's ideas about boundary concepts and the acquisition of an educational attitude. In 1917 in his book *Riddles of the Soul* (The case for Anthroposophy) Steiner added to his epistemology by analysing the relationship between anthroposophy and what he referred to as anthropology, by which he meant the conventional humanities and cultural sciences. These, he insists, are both valid ways of investigating the human being which, although coming from different directions, meet at the same phenomena and therefore can complement each other. Steiner addresses the idea that knowledge based solely on sensory perception has its limits (a fact that no one in the social sciences would argue with today, which why we use theory). He advises that if the inquirer has the patience to think at the limits of cognition, they can gradually experience the fruitfulness of the ideas of anthroposophy in illuminating phenomena and that in this way one can gradually and systematically expand the limits of cognition. Furthermore, by dwelling at the limits of cognition, one can experience an imaginative energy that enlivens the normal process of experience that takes place when we create mental representations. He compares this to the difference between a photographic negative and a full colour print.

Through the process of dwelling at the boundary of cognition, we can begin to preserve the immediacy of lived experience before it becomes a mere representation. The connection of this idea with intuitive knowledge-in-practice as opposed to knowledge about practice becomes clear. Kiersch also suggests that boundary experiences can also be gained through artistic exercises and in social processes. In the activity of

engaging with phenomena, the boundary idea itself becomes the organ of looking, it becomes imaginative looking, or the heuristic lens that directs our gaze towards what is relevant.

In the fourth appendix of the *Riddles of the Soul / Case for Anthroposophy*, Steiner distinguishes between three cognitive processes, related to spiritual experiences, „1. psychic or soul processes leading to a spiritual perception; 2. spiritual perceptions themselves; 3. spiritual perceptions translated into concepts of ordinary consciousness.“ (2010, p.58). Such perceptions cannot be retained and retrieved like ordinary memories; the connection to the spiritual perception must be re-experienced in the soul. However, “what can, within memory, be retained of an actual spiritual perception is not the perception itself but the disposition of soul through which one attained the perception... What I should try to remember is something that will call back the psychic preparations that led me to the perception in the first place” (p. 57). In other words, the ‘seeing’ or ‘seeking’ is itself a disposition, a habit of mind, that directs our attention. It is the activity of seeing that is objective rather than the result in the form of a memory. However, Steiner adds that one can achieve the right relationship between the three processes mentioned above through careful practice; cultivating a way of looking that is not from the position of observer outside the phenomenon, but is a participation within the phenomenon, and as Steiner later says in the First Teachers Course, the place where this take place is the stage (as in theatre) of the mind, which reaches from within, out into the world and we as inquirers, dwell within that psychic/soul space.

My reading of this notion of boundary ideas can be expressed in the following diagram, which is based on Vygotsky’s (1987) idea of the zone of next development to describe the space in which the learner/researcher moves from a current horizon (1) of knowledge to a new horizon (2) by internalizing a boundary idea learned either through meditative/contemplative processes, through hermeneutic study (see below) or through participation in social or artistic processes. Vygotsky’s original idea is that learning precedes development. By analogy, by internalizing a boundary idea, a new level of understanding of something that could not be perceived before is achieved. The new understanding forms a new organ of knowledge and thus leads to a general mental development. As Dewey put it (1938), each substantial new experience fundamentally alter our possibilities for new experiences.

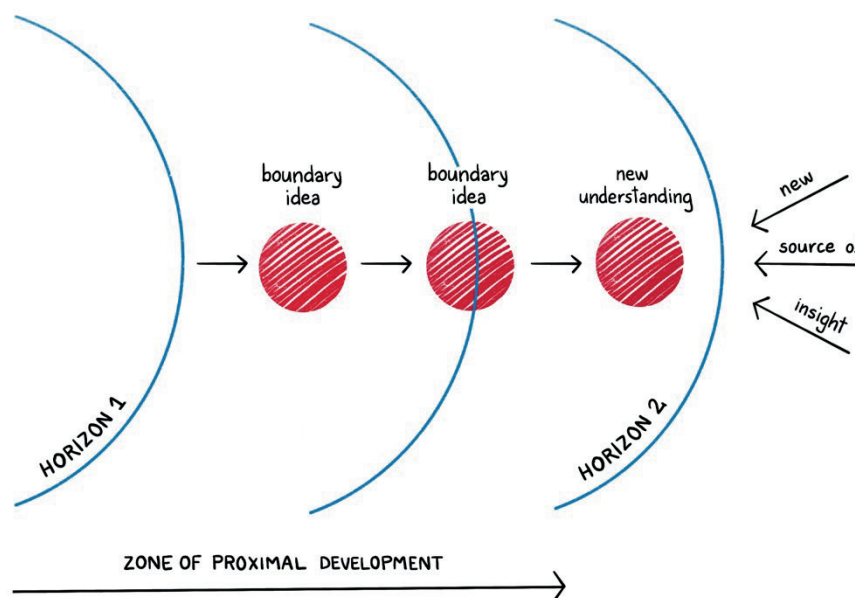


Illustration 2 Engaging with boundary ideas expands our horizon of knowing-in-practice.

Contemplative methods in pedagogical reflection and research

In 1920 Steiner (1982, GA302a) introduced the idea of the meditatively acquired knowledge of the human being, which in a way is another version of his presentation of the boundary ideas. This approach consists of studying the foundations of pedagogical anthropology, meditating on them and then ‘remembering’ them in practice. This approach has found many explanations. My interpretation, put as simply as possible, is to work hermeneutically with the text and the ideas it contains, i.e. to interpret and contextualize the content in such a way that the student can think and critically relate to the ideas themselves, thus internalizing or embodying them as ‘our’ ideas- they become ours and we can put them into our own words.

The second step is meditating. The contemplative inquiry method described by Arthur Zajonc (2007) can be used to internalize and ‘digest’ these important ideas. Kiersch (1995) suggests that many of the polarities presented by Steiner (e.g., blood-nerve, sympathy-antipathy) or examples of metamorphosis can be used as motifs for contemplative meditation. The third step of remembering is a little more difficult to understand, but it is clear from the examples Steiner gives that it refers to situated, intuitive moments of knowing what to do in context. We can imagine that the process of active study and meditative internalization of ‘boundary ideas’ can lead to recognizing the implicit, non-visible meaning of a given pedagogical situation. Elsewhere (Rawson, 2020 a and b) I have linked this process to the formation of dispositions that enable the teacher to ‘read’ pedagogical situations, or, to change metaphor, through deep listening we can understand what the situation/person is saying. This whole process needs to be complemented by critical reflection, because not all intuitions are true or appropriate.

The third aspect is most clearly explained by Steiner in Ilkley in August 1923 (2007, GA307), when he said that the teachers’ conferences in the Waldorf school are an ongoing living university in which the teachers bring the fruits of their reflections and work and share them with their colleagues. The word *Hochschule* means university, and the main functions of universities are research and teaching. I argued that what Steiner was proposing would today be called practitioner research. He also made it clear that the development of curriculum and education depended on the ongoing evaluation and review of practice based on Waldorf principles.

8. Anthroposophy is not limited to what Steiner said or wrote

There is a view that anthroposophy is not limited to what Steiner said or wrote, and that it is a manifestation of a perennial philosophy, the underlying common core of wisdom linking most major religions, mystical traditions and philosophies, a kind of neo Neo-Platonism, as promoted in the Renaissance by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1999) and his pupil Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), in the 19th Century by Transcendentalists and in the 20th Century by Aldous Huxley, Idris Shah, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Ken Wilber. In other words, anthroposophy is one (recent) version of a wisdom that has been expressed across many traditions.

Comment

It may be helpful to move away from the kind of anthroposophical exceptionalism that suggests that Steiner’s anthroposophy is the culmination of world cultural development and the final word (to date) on spiritual truth, by recognizing that there are many valid cosmologies, philosophies, spiritual paths and sources of wisdom. It may even be fruitful to make comparisons between the major world religions and philosophies, in the way scholars such as Julian Baggini (2018) have done, or the way the French scholar Francois Julien (2019) has done comparing Western and Chinese thinking and put anthroposophy in this context.

There is another aspect of this point that needs mentioning. There is a tendency for some people to present their personal interpretation (or that of a specific group) of Steiner as anthroposophy. This is more common than might be supposed. People adopt, perhaps colonize would be a better word, ideas from anthroposophy that they strongly identify with and speak of these in shorthand, saying anthroposophy

stands for this or that, without citing and contextualizing Steiner, as if it were taken-for-granted that this is what anthroposophy is, when in fact they actually mean is, “this is what I/we think anthroposophy is”. They usually do this in an un-reflected way, implying, “as we know... anthroposophy sees this or stands for that”. This may sound authoritative but can justifiably be termed “colonized anthroposophy”.

9. Anthroposophy as a basis for Waldorf education

Finally, we come to possible Waldorf perspectives on the relationship of Waldorf education to anthroposophy. Contrary to what some critics, such as Prange, Ullrich and Zander claim, and quite a few anthroposophists believe, Waldorf education is not a medium for promoting anthroposophy. As Schieren has suggested,

Anthroposophy has a purely methodological function in Waldorf education. It is not an end in itself, but merely a means to an end. It is intended to help to better understand the children and adolescents in their development through its consideration of the nature of the human being. Epistemology, anthropology and psychology are the central features of Waldorf education. In addition, there is the individual (by all means also esoteric) training path of the teacher, which makes educational qualification possible in the first place in Steiner’s view. (Schieren, 2022).

This view has earned Schieren criticism, notably from those who see this position as a significant dilution of the anthroposophical contribution to Waldorf education, for example Zdrzil (2023). No one disputes that anthroposophical insights into the nature of the developing human being should inform the way teachers teach. However, I do think it is realistic for Waldorf education to claim the whole of anthroposophy as its basis. Rather, I would take a parsimonious view of describing a necessary minimum for the official, institutional basis for the education, and leaving the rest a matter for individual judgement. There is no maximum, but certainly a minimum of texts as orientation.

What would that minimum consist of? I believe Waldorf education needs and can justify its reliance on Steiner’s theory of knowledge (including its later development in *Riddles of the Soul*), his pedagogical anthropology (First Teachers’ Course) and the pedagogical lectures. Steiner’s pedagogical anthropology has its roots in earlier works (such as *Theosophy, A Psychology of Body, Soul and Spirit: Anthroposophy, Psychosophy and Pneumatosophy – GA115, Anthroposophy – A fragment*), and teacher educators should be aware of the genesis of such ideas such as Steiner’s theory of the senses. They should also be aware of the subtle but important differences in Steiner’s references, for example to language, in pedagogical and non-pedagogical contexts. The role of teacher educators is to ‘translate’ the ideas of anthroposophical pedagogical anthropology into a working set of generative principles that new teachers can use to develop and evaluate their practice. Over the years they can deepen their knowledge of Steiner’s original works in whatever way seems of interest to them.

My view is that anthroposophy is a practice, a way of relating to the world, rather than a fixed system, a body of knowledge or a science. It only exists when we do it. It can certainly inspire people to develop ideas in various fields of life, but these ideas have to be framed in a way that gains the necessary acceptance in those fields. The role of the Anthroposophical Society is nurture and develop anthroposophical practices. The role of Waldorf education (or medicine or biodynamic agriculture) is to contribute as much as possible to the educational life of the maximum number of children and young people as possible. This means applying (and where necessary justifying) the generative principles of Waldorf education wherever this can be done. This won’t always be in classical Waldorf schools, or even be called Waldorf (or Steiner) nor will it always be done by anthroposophists, but they do need to understand the principles of Waldorf education. It always has to be adapted to the situation. It also means that there are aspects of Steiner’s work that we simply don’t need or accept.

This would be my minimal selection from the whole canon of anthroposophical literature by Steiner. Indirectly, his contributions to the development of Eurythmy, speech formation and drama, painting, sculpture and medicine and therapy are also relevant in specific fields of education. This may seem too little but given the wealth of ideas in Steiner’s specifically educational works, this is more than enough for

practicing Waldorf teachers. This is a minimum not a maximum. There is no limit to what we can think, as Steiner told us.

Conclusions

There is an urgent need for good, effective ideas in the world and anthroposophy could be part of the answer to the polycrisis, and Waldorf education can contribute to the solution to the crisis in the field of education. Both can contribute through their practice and through the way they are represented in a way that is accessible to the academic world. The way anthroposophy is treated by some academics and journalists verges on discrimination, which is always irrational, and Waldorf voices should say so publicly. The way anthroposophy is treated by some anthroposophists verges on the religious. I argue that when it comes to presenting or representing Waldorf education in public, Waldorf practitioners should treat Steiner texts like any others that can be read and interpreted, for example, like the works of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky or Paulo Freire. The Waldorf movement should be studied as a historical, sociological and pedagogical phenomenon, like the Reform Pedagogy movement, Montessori or Regio Emilia. Anthroposophy should be referred to as a cultural phenomenon, rather than as a science or as a body of knowledge that claims to be true, and thus studied using the full range of appropriate interpretive scientific methods. This means that Steiner texts, art works and artefacts and the products of the anthroposophical movement need to be hermeneutically studied, contextualized, and analyzed, like any other historical movement.

This, however, says nothing about Waldorf or anthroposophical practice. This is the most important point for readers to remember. What we do and how we do it, is not a discourse but a reality for which we take responsibility.

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